

## MONOTHEISM AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

The main objective of this paper is to show that the presence of evil in this world appears to be irreconcilable with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent God, Who is claimed to be the Creator of the world, and that this can be regarded as one of the cogent arguments for doubting the plausibility of monotheism.

Monotheism, as a religious hypothesis, holds that there certainly exists a unitary personal being ( God ) Who is omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, just and benevolent and Who has created this universe to achieve a specific purpose of His own. This means that, according to this hypothesis, God is a Personal Reality or a Transcendent Person Who can be worshipped and loved by us, and Who also loves us and cares for us. As a Creator of this world, He is immanent in it and also transcends it; but He is not identical with it, nor is He indifferent to it. Thus, so far as the relation of God to the world is concerned, both pantheism and deism are rejected by monotheism. This theory also rejects polytheism and dualistic theism by maintaining that there is only one God Who cannot in any way be influenced or limited by any other power. This infinite personal God alone is the object of our prayer and worship, and we can always rely upon His unlimited power for attaining guidance, strength and peace in our lives. It is obvious that, on this theory, God is not an impersonal force or an intellectual principle; He is rather a conscious personal being Who can be affected by our prayer, worship or true devotion for Him.

This theory is confronted with many serious difficulties, and of these the problem of evil is perhaps the most formidable and appears to admit of no satisfactory solution. This problem can be stated as follows. All sentient beings have to undergo an experience of physical pain or suffering in their lives at some time or other in more or less acute degree either because of certain natural forces over which they have no control or because of their own behaviour towards one another. This experience of physical suffering is common to both animals and human beings, and no individual being is completely immune from it. In addition to this physical pain, human beings, at some time or other, have to

undergo an experience of mental agony caused by certain unfortunate happenings ( such as an incurable disease or untimely demise of a beloved one ) which are completely beyond their control. This pain or suffering is so pervasive in the world of sentient beings that none of them remains and can remain wholly untouched by it. Gautama Buddha rightly held that suffering is an undeniable fact of life as such. It is this suffering ( whether physical or mental ) which constitutes the problem of evil and which seems to be irreconcilable with the omnipotent, omniscient, just, loving and benevolent God of monotheism.

To understand this problem more clearly it is necessary to divide evil into two categories—( 1 ) moral evil and ( 2 ) natural evil. Evil which is caused by man's own negligence, ignorance or wickedness may be termed " moral evil ". A serious train accident causing untimely deaths of many innocent people or crippling injuries to them may be the result of sheer negligence on the part of some railway employees. A person may suffer from incurable cancer of lungs caused by heavy smoking simply because of his ignorance of the fatal effects of tobacco. Man's deliberate and wanton cruelty to his fellow-beings, which is so widespread in our world today, can be said to be the result of his wickedness or moral turpitude. It is clear from these examples that man himself is more or less responsible for this sort of evil, because it results from the exercise of his own will. It is for this reason that this kind of evil is called " moral evil ".

But the second category constitutes that type of evil over which man has no control and therefore he cannot be held responsible for it. This kind of evil may be called " natural evil ", for it results from the operation of certain natural laws. This natural evil causes considerable pain or suffering to human beings and also to other creatures. Floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, famines, epidemics and volcanic outbursts are some of the examples of this " natural evil ". Thousands of sentient beings are destroyed or seriously crippled by these natural calamities which do occur in all parts of the world at sometime or other. Even today, when science and technology claim to have made tremendous progress, man becomes quite helpless against these natural catastrophes. Thus, it is obvious that evil, in the form of physical pain or mental agony, is a hard reality which must be faced by all theists.

The important question now to be considered here is : how can the presence of this widespread evil be reconciled with the existence of God Who is omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent Creator of this world ? Has He created this evil which He does not want to eradicate ? In other words, does He deliberately make His sentient beings suffer helplessly ? If so, He cannot be regarded as an all-good, all-loving and benevolent God as theists claim Him to be. On the other hand, if God really wants to remove this evil and is unable to do so, then He cannot be considered to be all-powerful or omnipotent. Moreover, if God has not created this evil, where has it come from ? Has it been created by some power other than God ? If this is the case, it implies that there is some other power which is at least equal, if not superior, to God. It also implies that God is only finite and limited, since this other power necessarily imposes a limitation upon Him. This position cannot, however, be acceptable to monotheists, for they claim that there is only one God Who, and Who alone, is the Creator of this world and Who is at the same time infinite and all-powerful. This monotheistic view necessarily entails that God has created evil, since there is no other power which, without His consent, could have created it. Now we are landed in a very serious dilemma if we fully accept the implications of the monotheistic position. Either God cannot eradicate evil despite the fact that it is His own creation, or He does not really want to remove it. If we accept the first alternative, God cannot be said to be all-powerful or omnipotent; and if we accept the second alternative, He cannot be considered to be all-good or benevolent. Indeed, it is this serious dilemma concerning the existence of evil and its relation to God which constitutes the most formidable problem for monotheism and which appears to me to be fatal to this religious hypothesis.

Many philosophers have, however, attempted to reconcile the presence of evil in this world with the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God. Some of the so-called solutions of this serious problem, claimed to be consistent with monotheism, are as follows :

It is held by some religious-minded philosophers that pain or suffering is the result of or just recompense for man's own sin for which either the sinner himself or his descendants are rightly

punished by God. It is therefore man himself, and not God, who is responsible for his suffering. This is how the theory of Karma is popularly interpreted by many religious persons. But there are several serious objections which seem to be fatal to this theory. In the first place, it is very difficult to say what precisely is meant by "sin". If "sin" means the disobedience of God's will as most religious people contend it to be, how do we exactly know what God's will is and to whom it is revealed? There appears to be no satisfactory and unanimously accepted answer to this question. Secondly, it may be asked why after all man commits sin if he does commit it at all. The only reasonable answer to this question seems to be that man commits sin because of certain innate tendencies or instincts. But who has implanted in him these natural proclivities which lead him to the path of sin? The only answer, consistent with monotheism, is that it is God Who has implanted these innate instincts in man. This means that God is ultimately responsible for man's sin, because He could have freed him from these natural instincts if He had so willed. Thirdly, on this theory, it is very difficult to account for the suffering of animals and innocent children, for they have not yet had the opportunity of committing sin if we do not already subscribe to the highly dubious hypothesis of rebirth and the immortality of the soul. Finally, this theory does grave injustice to the descendants of the sinner since it holds that they are rightly punished by God not for their own sins but for the sins committed by their ancestors. If God punishes innocent people for what they themselves have not done, He can be anything but righteous and just. In short, all these serious objections conclusively prove this theory to be unpalatable.

The second solution of the problem of evil is presented by some philosophers who subscribe to absolute idealism. These philosophers completely deny the reality of evil and regard it as wholly illusory. They hold that what seems to be evil is in fact good if viewed in a larger context. They also contend that evil is a wholly subjective experience and therefore has no real existence as a part of objective reality. Thus, F. H. Bradley frankly tells us that, "Since in Ultimate Reality all existence and all thought and feeling become one, we may even say that every feature in the universe is thus absolutely good."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, advocating this view

regarding the problem of evil, Bosanquet writes : " Evil, one might say, is good in the wrong place. ... There is nothing in evil which cannot be absorbed in good and contributory to it; and it springs from the same source as good and value."<sup>2</sup> It is thus clear that, according to this theory, our experience of pain or suffering is a sheer delusion and has no objective reality.

But this theory is also open to many serious objections. In the first place, it does not satisfactorily answer the question why all sentient beings, including rational beings, are involved in such a pervasive and engrossing delusion of evil. Has this delusion been created by God ? If so, He ( and not human beings ) is wholly responsible for it. If God has not created this illusory experience of evil, how can its origin be accounted for ? Secondly, calling evil a sheer illusion does not in any way lessen the acuteness or intensity of the suffering of those who are subjected to it. If a person is suffering from an acute physical pain or mental agony, it would, indeed, be cruel on our part to tell him that his suffering is not real but only an illusion resulting from his incapacity to look at it from a larger point of view. This kind of approach towards the problem of evil completely ignores its acuteness and intensity experienced by those who are confronted with it. Thirdly, if evil is a sheer illusion, all of us, who regard it as genuine, are wholly deluded. It means that God has created the world in which so many beings are in perpetual delusion. Why, then, does He not emancipate them from this self deception ? In fact, such a world of dupes can hardly be preferable to that of suffering sinners. Finally, if this theory is accepted as true, it would be unnecessary and even undesirable to struggle against moral evil and also to strive to remove or alleviate the suffering of human beings and other creatures. If evil is nothing but a mere illusion, it is better to forget or ignore it than make efforts to overcome it. Thus, this theory makes moral struggle and a sincere effort to conquer evil completely worthless. This objection can also be urged against the theory of sin mentioned above, since according to this theory, pain or suffering is a punishment given by God rightly for the sins of creatures, and therefore it is futile and undesirable to strive to eradicate or mitigate their suffering. Thus, on both these theories, our moral struggle against evil and our sincere efforts to overcome it ( to which we attach so much value ) are wholly meaningless.

The third theory proposed by many philosophers to account for the problem of evil regards pain or suffering as a necessary and unavoidable factor for the existence and recognition of good. It does not deny the reality of evil but rather holds that we value what is good because of the presence of evil in this world. Our moral character becomes stronger and loftier when we have to fight and conquer various temptations and evil tendencies within us. The protagonists of this theory also contend that it is suffering which gives us strength and enables us to endure hardships with courage and fortitude. "A world", says William Temple, "in which there was no victory would be, so far, an inferior world. But if there is to be victory, there must be opposition. To demand the good of victory without the existence of an antagonist is to demand something with no meaning."<sup>3</sup> Thus, on this theory, the existence of evil makes our world morally superior to one in which there is no evil to be conquered. The exponents of this theory maintain that the value of our moral character lies in striving to fight and overcome what is evil. They also hold that it is suffering which generates genuine compassion and profound love in human beings for one another, so we cannot deny its great value in our lives.

This theory seems to be more convincing and satisfactory than the two theories mentioned above. But, like the earlier theories, it is also not free from many serious objections which appear to be fatal to its plausibility. In the first place, it makes the existence and knowledge of good wholly dependent upon the existence and knowledge of evil. In other words, on this theory, good cannot exist and cannot be recognized as good without the existence and knowledge of what is bad. We know what is good simply because we can distinguish it from what is evil. This means that good and evil are internally related—that is to say, the relation to evil enters into the very being of good and makes it what it is. If this is true, then good cannot be wholly good. Secondly, it may be asked why, after all, God constituted our mind in such a way that it is unable to know good without distinguishing it from evil. God is omnipotent; and therefore if He had desired, He could have given us the capacity to recognize good as good without the necessity of distinguishing it from evil. Thus, if monotheism is true, our knowledge of good and its existence need not necessarily depend



upon the knowledge and existence of what is bad. Thirdly, it is very difficult to believe that suffering—especially long and acute suffering—can in any way improve man's character. It is a common experience that acute physical suffering, continued over a long period, often turns a cheerful, good-natured and generous-hearted person into an irritable, inconsiderate and self-centred individual whose sole interest is to get rid of his own suffering. This shows that suffering is not only unnecessary but can even be a positive obstacle in the improvement of man's character. Fourthly, this theory fails to account for moral evil—that is to say, it does not answer the crucial question : why do human beings deliberately commit sins or crimes and torture their fellow-beings and other creatures ? This question cannot plausibly be answered ( as Leibniz tried to answer it ) by saying that man, by his very nature, is imperfect and because of this imperfection he is sometimes involved in moral evil. If this answer is accepted as true, then the responsibility for man's moral evil ultimately falls on God Who created him with this imperfection which is the source of his moral evil. God, being omnipotent, could have created man without this imperfection and thus could have saved him from moral evil if He had so willed. This argument shows that God, and not man, is ultimately responsible for his moral evil. Finally, this theory, wrongly presupposes that there is the right amount and also there is just distribution of suffering amongst human beings. It is not very difficult to prove that some human beings have to undergo too much suffering while others have too little share of it. It is not at all clear how the proponents of this theory would reasonably account for this obvious gross injustice regarding the distribution of suffering. To explain this injustice they will perhaps fall back on the theory of man's sin, but this theory, as we have seen, is far from satisfactory. Besides this injustice concerning the distribution of suffering, the presupposition of the right amount of suffering in the world has a very serious implication which is worth pointing out here. If our world has the right amount of suffering and if good exists and can be known simply because of this suffering, then pain or suffering has its own great value in the Divine Order of the world. This implies that it is not only unnecessary and undesirable but also a serious crime against God to strive to eradicate or even to diminish the amount of suffering in this world. Thus, like the earlier two theories, this theory also

makes our efforts to eradicate or to alleviate suffering wholly futile and undesirable. This, indeed, is a very serious implication which constitutes a fatal objection to the theory in question. In short, all these objections, taken together, conclusively show that this theory also fails to provide a satisfactory solution of the problem of evil.

The fourth solution also recognizes the reality of evil and tries to account for it on the basis of free will which, it is said, is God's gift to man. God has created man with the capacity to choose freely between good and evil, and it is because of this freedom of will that he is called "a moral being". Morality rests both on the knowledge of good and evil and also on the ability to choose freely what is good and eschew what is bad. If man is to be genuinely free, he cannot be compelled even by God to choose what is good—that is to say, he must be left free to choose evil as well. Thus, according to the proponents of this theory, evil is the result of man's misuse of his freedom of will and therefore he, and not God, is wholly responsible for evil in this world.

This free will theory also appears to be very convincing, and many philosophers have regarded it as a satisfactory solution of the problem of evil. But if we examine this theory more thoroughly and critically, we shall find that it is also liable to many serious objections which prove it to be conclusively untenable. In the first place, it does not at all account for natural evil which, as we have seen, is beyond man's control. Considerable suffering is caused to human beings and other creatures by natural catastrophes, and man cannot be held responsible for this kind of suffering. Moreover, there is a great deal of suffering in the animal world, and it cannot be explained on the hypothesis of man's free will. It is generally held that animals do not have the freedom of will; and if this is so, why do they suffer so much pain which they themselves do not freely choose? Secondly, even if it is accepted that evil is the result of man's misuse of the freedom of will, God is not thereby absolved from the responsibility for the evil. If, as theists claim, God is really Omniscient, this means that He was already fully aware of the fact that man might misuse his freedom of the will. But, despite this knowledge of man's possible misuse of his free will,



God endowed him with freedom and thus deliberately introduced the possibility of evil through the creation of man with this capacity. Before the creation of this world there was only God Who, according to theists, is all-good. This implies that there was no evil in the universe before the creation of man, and God knowingly introduced pain or suffering in it by creating man with the freedom of will which, He knew could be misused by him. Thus, God cannot be wholly absolved from the responsibility of creating suffering in the evil-less universe. Thirdly, it is not unreasonable to raise an important question here—namely, why does after all man sometimes misuse his free will by rejecting good and choosing evil? The only answer which appears to be reasonable is that man some times prefers evil to good because he is himself partially evil—that is, he has certain innate ignoble tendencies which some times lead him to the path of evil. From this it follows that evil is not the result—but rather it is the cause—of man's misuse of free will. He some times makes misuse of this free will because by his very nature he is at least partially an evil being. Why, then, it may be asked, did God create man with this potentiality of evil while He Himself is all-good and, being Omnipotent, He could have created him without any evil natural tendencies? So far as I know, theists have not given any satisfactory answer to this question. Moreover, another significant question to be considered here is: how could God, Who is Himself all-good, have created man with the potentiality of evil? In other words, whence, does man's partially evil nature (because of which he sometimes makes misuse of his free will) come from? All these difficulties, which arise when we consider man to be only partially evil, would become far more formidable if we regard him as wholly evil and sinful as some religious philosophers or saints believe him to be. It may, for instance, be asked whence, after all, man derives his wholly sinful nature while his Creator, God is all-good and contains no evil within Him. Finally, if man's freedom necessarily entails the possibility of evil, it is hard to believe that ours is the best possible world. The world in which this possibility of evil was wholly absent would certainly be much superior to ours; and since God is all-powerful, He could have created such an evil-less world if He had so willed. We are thus driven to the conclusion that the free will theory,

like all other theories considered above, also fails to reconcile the presence of evil in this world with the existence of an all-powerful and benevolent God.

The fifth solution (if it can at all be called a "solution") of the problem of evil has been proposed by some religious philosophers who regard it as wholly absurd on the part of man to seek for a solution of this problem. They hold that human understanding is very limited and man can perceive only a small segment of Reality. With this limited capacity of understanding, finite human mind cannot expect to comprehend the mysterious ways of God. Many things, says Saint Augustine, are beyond man's comprehension, and the problem of evil is one of them. It is sheer impertinence on the part of man to venture to question the arrangements of the infinite and all-powerful God. Who are we to ask why God did not arrange things differently? Despite pain or suffering in the world, a truly faithful worshipper does not give up his faith in Omnipotent and benevolent God Who, for him, always acts for the best. Thus, according to the proponents of this theory, man is too ignorant to be able to find a solution of the problem of evil.

It is, however, not difficult to see that this religious approach towards the problem of evil cannot satisfy those who want to examine it critically and objectively. Perhaps it would not be unreasonable to say that the advocates of this approach condemn the very attempt to find a solution of the problem of evil in order to save their own child-like faith in the omnipotence and benevolence of God. At least two serious objections can be urged against their view. In the first place, human reason can readily comprehend that the two propositions—(A) "pain or suffering exists in this world" and (B) "God, the Creator of this world is both omnipotent and benevolent"—are wholly inconsistent with each other. In fact, these mutually conflicting propositions are not so much beyond reason as against it. We cannot understand them simply because they militate against reason and not because our understanding is limited. Thus, it is hard to accept the view that the problem of evil is beyond human understanding. Secondly, if reason is impotent in comprehending God's ways, then we shall have to cease to reason about religious matters. But religious philosophers do not main-

tain that their hypotheses cannot be proved by reason; on the contrary, they contend that their religious hypotheses are wholly rational and therefore must be accepted as true. Many arguments, as we know, have been advanced by these philosophers to prove the existence of God and also to prove their assumption that this universe is created by Him alone. All this means that these philosophers do accept the competence of reason in regard to religious matters. How, then can they hold without self-contradiction that human reason is absolutely impotent in comprehending the problem of evil? Is it not wholly arbitrary to reject the competence of reason in finding a solution of the problem of evil while its competence is fully accepted in all other religious matters? As a matter of fact, to say that the problem of evil is beyond human understanding is just to evade the whole issue in order to save monotheism from this insuperable difficulty which, indeed, is fatal to it.

In short, all these solutions of the problem of evil which we have examined here and which are supposed to be consistent with monotheism fail to solve this problem—that is to say, they fail to reconcile the presence of evil in the world with the existence of its omnipotent and benevolent Creator.

In view of this formidable difficulty posed by the problem of evil to monotheism, some advocates of this theory have suggested that, although God is all-good, He is not all-powerful. This means that, in some sense, God is limited, and it is not possible even for Him to do certain things which He wills to do. "It has long been believed", says David Elton Trueblood, "that God is limited by the laws of logic.... Even God cannot create an interdependent community of persons without also producing a situation in which evils spread.... If omnipotence means ability to do anything, then surely God is not omnipotent, and the problem of evil is not only insoluble but irreducible. But this simple notion of omnipotence is a purely childish notion and one which reflective thought can remove."<sup>4</sup> This statement of an advocate of monotheism is a frank admission of the fact that the existence of evil cannot be reconciled with the omnipotence of God and that God is not therefore omnipotent in the sense of being able to do whatever He wills to do. But True-

blood calls this notion of omnipotence "a purely childish notion" which, according to him, must be abandoned. The question then arises: if to be able to do anything one wants to do is not omnipotence, what else can this term mean? So far as I know, Trueblood does not give any satisfactory answer to this question. I think if omnipotence is to be ascribed to God, He must be expected to do anything He wants to do; and if He is unable to do this, He is not omnipotent in the real sense of the term. It is worth pointing out here that, like Trueblood, some other protagonists of theism—such as Hastings Rashdall, William James, E. S. Brightman and P. A. Bertocci—have denied the omnipotence of God in this sense. They support (in some sense or other) the Doctrine of Divine Finitude by saying that God's knowledge and power are limited, therefore, He is not omnipotent in the sense of being able to know and do anything He wants to. On this view, even God cannot conquer evil, although He is Himself all-good and wants to overcome it.

Now, if we accept this doctrine of the limitation of God as true, then we shall have to abandon monotheism. This is because in that case we shall have to admit that in addition to God there is some other power which, if not superior to, is at least co-equal with God and which necessarily imposes a limitation upon Him. This, indeed, is not monotheism but dualistic theism; and it has its own difficulties which I do not propose to discuss here, for their discussion is beyond the purview of my paper. I only want to stress the fact that the rejection of God's omnipotence necessarily entails the total abandonment of monotheism. We can thus conclude that the presence of evil in the world is rationally irreconcilable with the monotheistic conception of God, and therefore it may be regarded as a conclusive evidence against this theory.

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#### NOTES

1. F. H. Bradley, "Appearance and Reality", p. 412.
2. Bernard Bosanquet, "The Value and Destiny of the Individual", pp. 209, 217.
3. William Temple, "Mens Creatrix", p. 268.
4. D. E. Trueblood, "Philosophy of Religion", p. 246.